

THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF PENNSYLVANIA

SENATE BILL

No. 577 Session of
1999

INTRODUCED BY BELAN, KUKOVICH, RHOADES, COSTA, STAPLETON,
KASUNIC, WAGNER, O'PAKE, BODACK, TARTAGLIONE, MUSTO, BELL,
STOUT, BOSCOLA, MELLOW, SCHWARTZ AND HART, MARCH 15, 1999

REFERRED TO EDUCATION, MARCH 15, 1999

AN ACT

1 Providing for Commonwealth support for a Mental Health and
2 Mental Retardation Staff Member Loan Forgiveness Program for
3 Commonwealth residents who graduate from institutions of
4 higher education and who apply their degrees to careers as
5 mental health and mental retardation staff members in this
6 Commonwealth.

7 The General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania
8 hereby enacts as follows:

9 Section 1. Short title.

10 This act shall be known and may be cited as the Mental Health
11 and Mental Retardation Staff Member Loan Forgiveness Program
12 Act.

13 Section 2. Findings and declaration of purpose.

14 The General Assembly finds and declares that:

15 (1) The number of college students planning to enter the
16 mental health and mental retardation profession appears to be
17 inadequate to meet the need for staff members in this
18 Commonwealth.

19 (2) Demand from industry and other opportunities attract

existing and potential staff members away from the profession.

(3) The pool of qualified staff members has diminished.

(4) Payment of a portion of student loans for mental health and mental retardation staff members serves the important public purpose of encouraging new staff members to continue their careers in this Commonwealth.

Section 3. Definitions.

The following words and phrases when used in this act shall have the meanings given to them in this section unless the context clearly indicates otherwise:

"Agency." The Pennsylvania Higher Education Assistance Agency.

"Qualified applicant." A person who meets all of the following criteria:

(1) The person has been hired as a full-time staff member by a county mental health or mental retardation service agency through a merit or civil service system approved by the Secretary of Public Welfare or by a private provider that is under contract with a county to provide mental health or mental retardation services and earns no more than \$35,000 per annum.

(2) The person has successfully completed both county and civil service probationary periods or, in the case of a contracted private provider, has successfully completed the provider's established probationary period.

(3) The person is performing staff duties at a county mental health or mental retardation service agency or at a private provider that is under contract with a county to provide mental health or mental retardation services.

(4) The person has borrowed through an agency-administered loan program.

"Secretary." The Secretary of Public Welfare of the Commonwealth.

"Staff member." A caseworker, direct caregiver, therapist, program coordinator or director.

Section 4. Mental Health and Mental Retardation Staff Member Loan Forgiveness Program.

A qualified applicant who is selected for the Mental Health and Mental Retardation Staff Member Loan Forgiveness Program in accordance with this act shall be eligible for payment by the agency of a portion of the debt incurred by the applicant through an agency-administered loan program for the education necessary to be certified as a mental health or mental retardation staff member in this Commonwealth. For each year that the applicant is a full-time mental health or mental retardation staff member in an approved county mental health or mental retardation department or a private provider under contract to a county, the agency may forgive a proportional part of the applicant's loan so that the loan may be entirely forgiven over four years of full-time staff work. No more than \$2,500 shall be forgiven in any year, and no more than \$10,000 shall be forgiven for any applicant. Payments shall be made in accordance with the procedures established by the agency.

Section 5. Loan forgiveness awards.

Recipients of the loan forgiveness awards shall be those mental health and mental retardation staff members who are certified by the secretary and who have received a satisfactory rating by the county office of mental health or mental retardation service or a private provider under contract to a

1 county. Each mental health or mental retardation staff member
2 shall be required to submit such documentation of continued
3 eligibility as the agency may require.

4 Section 6. Funding.

5 Loan forgiveness awards may be made to the extent that funds
6 are appropriated by the General Assembly.

7 Section 7. Responsibility of agency.

8 It shall be the responsibility of the agency to administer
9 the Mental Health and Mental Retardation Staff Worker Loan
10 Forgiveness Program established by this act and to adopt such
11 regulations, policies, procedures and forms as are necessary and
12 not inconsistent with the provisions of this act.

13 Section 8. Retroactivity.

14 Loan forgiveness under this act may be based on mental health
15 and mental retardation staff work performed prior to the
16 effective date of this act.

17 Section 9. Effective date.

18 This act shall take effect in 60 days.